

Nov-2014

Photo Essay: The Other Las Vegas

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Recommended Citation

Reynolds, Ronald F. (2014). Photo Essay: The Other Las Vegas. *Bridgewater Review*, 33(2), 15-23.
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol33/iss2/7

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Figure 1. Spring Mountains

The Other Las Vegas

PHOTO ESSAY

Ronald F. Reynolds

When most people think of Las Vegas, the picture that comes to mind is of casinos, shows, honky-tonk and extravagance. But Las Vegas is also a community of regular people who work at mundane jobs and live ordinary lives just like the rest of us. When they have the chance they, too, like to get outside, hopefully beat the heat and enjoy the great outdoors. Many visitors never get beyond the “Strip” to experience some of the nearby scenic locations. These photographs show a few of those proximate attractions.

Summer temperatures really sizzle and often exceed 105 degrees. Even with the “dry heat,” it is hard to enjoy the outdoors under those conditions. But by taking a short drive, one can increase altitude substantially and undergo a dramatic decrease in temperature. In half an hour it is possible to escape to Mount Charleston in the Spring Mountains National Recreation Area (Figure 1). Since elevations exceed 10,000 feet, one will experience there a temperature drop of 20 degrees or more. Given these cooler temperatures and the low humidity, it is fairly comfortable for hiking and other activities. At this elevation trees grow and it is very picturesque. There are many hiking and climbing trails here as well as ski facilities, in the winter season. In the lower elevations, typical Mojave Desert vegetation prevails (see inside front cover photograph).



Figure 2. Red Rock Canyon



Figure 3. Scooters



Figure 4. Wild Burros

Nearby is Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area (Figure 2), which is slightly warmer due to its lower altitude but still cooler than the city. This is a really beautiful place with a 13-mile scenic loop drive, numerous hiking trails and rock-climbing opportunities. “Scooters” (Figure 3) are available for rent. These two-passenger vehicles are colorful and a lot of fun to drive along the scenic loop. Here, it is possible to spot wildlife: a herd of wild burros

(Figure 4), mule deer or bighorn sheep. A couple of miles down the road is Spring Mountain Ranch State Park (Figure 5). Before it was purchased by the State of Nevada in 1974, Spring Mountain had had several celebrity owners, among whom Howard Hughes was the best known. Surprisingly, there is no record of Hughes ever having stayed at the ranch. The Park is a lovely escape from the high temperatures and congestion of the city. At an elevation of 3800 feet, it is usually 10–15 degrees cooler than Las Vegas. The ranch is an

oasis and a great place for horseback riding and other outdoor pursuits. There are picnic areas, grassy fields for playing baseball or Frisbee, tours of the ranch house and hiking trails. Lake Harriet (Figure 6) provides habitat for waterfowl and is frequently crowded with ducks. From May through September, there is an extensive Summer Theater program including outdoor concerts.



Figure 5. Spring Mountain Ranch

One of the most stunning attractions in the area is south of Las Vegas, outside Boulder City on the Colorado River. Here, Hoover Dam stands 726 feet tall and impounds Lake Mead, which extends 112 miles upstream. It is an awesome sight to behold, especially at night (Figure 7). The dam was completed in 1936, at which time it was the biggest construction project ever undertaken. There are three and one-quarter million cubic yards of concrete in the dam, so much that after

all these years it is not yet fully cured! Hoover Dam has multiple purposes, including flood control, recreational use, and hydroelectric generation. It also functions as a reservoir. Until recently, the only way to cross the Colorado River in the vicinity was to drive directly over the top of the dam. There is always heavy pedestrian traffic there and it is a snarl to get through. Since 9/11, there have been major security concerns, so a new bridge was built over the Colorado just downstream from the dam. It is now possible to cross the river on a multi-lane road at

high speed. When the bridge was built it included a pedestrian walkway from which you can now get a magnificent view overlooking the dam and part of Lake Mead (Figure 8). There is plenty to see on top of the dam, but you can also take guided tours inside the dam where you can see the turbines and pass through the network of tunnels. It is an eerie feeling to be deep inside the dam and feel it quivering due to the water rushing through and spinning the giant turbines.



Figure 6. Lake Harriet



Figure 7. Hoover Dam at Night



Figure 8. Hoover Dam



Figure 9. Lake Mead Marina



Figure 10. *Desert Princess*



Figure 11. Lake Mead

The Lake Mead National Recreation Area impounded behind Hoover Dam serves as a reservoir but also provides opportunity for people living in the desert to experience the fun of being out on the water. Many people own pleasure boats that they moor at the Lake Mead Marina (Figure 9) or at other marinas along the lake shore. All that water in the middle of the desert produces a marvelous sight. Today, it is a little less marvelous than it once was. Due to a combination of recent

dry weather and poor conservation, the lake level has dropped substantially (80–100 feet) since 1991. Figure 9 documents this fall: there is a prominent white “bathtub ring” encircling the lake showing former water levels. Still, much of its beauty and function remain as it was. It is possible to rent a houseboat and spend time on the lake or take a paddle-wheeler cruise on the *Desert Princess* (Figure 10) and enjoy the magnificent scenery (Figure 11).

If you get to Sin City, take some time away from The Strip and explore some of *The Other Las Vegas*.



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